

Tom Rau's "Boat Smart Chronicles" (no relation to USPS Boat Smart) is one of those rare, important books that seeks to alter how we think about small boat safety, and—dare we hope—reduce the appalling statistics on recreational boating deaths, injuries, and property losses.

Drawing on nearly three decades of SAR experience in the US Coast Guard, Sr. Chief Rau melds together true accounts of boating incidents on Lake Michigan, together with expert analysis of what went wrong, and draws from this cogent advice for the recreational boater. Rau also elicits the insights of dozens of professionals from NOAA forecasters to harbormasters, from tall ship captains to marina operators. This is not the province of theory but of bitter lessons learned.

Some may shy away from this book because of its focus on Lake Michigan, but that would be a great mistake. By focusing on a body of water, Rau makes it possible to do a surprisingly in-depth analysis of the topic, and out of this emerges a way of thinking about boating mishaps that is applicable to any other waters from rivers to coasts, inland lakes, and the Great Lakes.

This is evidenced by the structure of the book, which classifies accidents into seven unconventional categories that Rau believes underpin most recreational boating mishaps. Much is to be gleaned here about risking cold water immersion on warm weather days, the practical difficulties of near-shore rescues, the deadly consequences of naive assumptions, and the insidious effects of widespread access to waters for which many boaters are unprepared. I especially appreciated the insightful analysis of safety harness issues, backed up by quite revealing experiments on their risks.

Some readers may bristle at Rau's characterizations of some boaters, but this is evidence of his passion and concern for boaters who find themselves quite literally in over their heads. A

great value of this book is that Rau gives you an assessment of recreational boating issues in the forthright and unvarnished language of a Coast Guard Senior Chief. There is after all little point in sugar coating a story that begins with a grave error in judgment and ends with death of a father and child.

Through his lively writing style and beautifully clear and compelling illustrations and photos, Rau gives us a text on boating safety that people will actually read. And beyond this, it is also a testimonial to the work and commitment of the USCG and other law enforcement and emergency personnel who serve at their own peril. The stories here are not the soundtrack heroism of movies but the day-to-day battle to snatch life from the jaws of death. In that sense, Rau's book can stand alongside Stonehouse's "Wreck Ashore" and Noble's "That Others Might Live."

Boating instructors will want to borrow liberally from these true stories to illustrate the consequences of failing to Boat Smart. With its nail-biting accounts of boating accidents and its deep insights, "Boat Smart Chronicles" has the potential to change your views on boating safety and the way you think about safety aboard your own recreational vessel.

–Fred Petillo

Sr. Chief Tom Rau (USCG ret.) writes a syndicated boating safety column with USCG Sector Lake Michigan. More information is available at <http://www.boatsmart.net>.